

HISTORY:
RELEVANT OR IRRELEVANT?

*You raise some interesting issues, but your analysis
is general and brief.*

by-

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I wouldn't say that History is irrelevant
any more than that the future is irrelevant
- Len Keeler

When asking the question: "Is the study of History relevant or fruitful to our present situation in life?" one first needs to determine what is "relevant."

Living in our emerging "valueless" society would normally tend to reduce the number of options left to answer the question about the relevance of history. In a socialist society one would expect an answer such as: "Whatever is good for the state is relevant and good." Whereas in a capitalistic society the expected answer would be, as Mr. Donald so unconsciously presented, "Whatever is good in promoting economic expansion, most importantly in my wallet, is relevant and good." Unfortunately, none of these views are sufficient. They are far too shallow and superficial for any real study of history. "...For man does not live by bread alone..."

The relevance of history can be seen when one considers that we, as human beings, live in a sphere of time and space. Living in a sphere of time and space essentially means that we as a people, as a nation, as individuals, did not just "out of the blue" come into existence, but that we have a background, a ~~zeit perhaps.~~ zits en leben, a history. The fact that our own personal ~~history~~ spans little more than twenty years does not make all that went before meaningless. We, in many ways, are the result

of what went before. The facts of that past are just as important or relevant to us as the methods used by Leonardo de Vinci in sculpting his ^{No} David are important in understanding or grasping the meaning or significance of the statue David.

An example of the relevance of history to today's contemporary society would be the claim made by Protestantism that it is not just a phenomenon that appeared during the Reformation but that it is the actual ancient tradition of the church that was lost during the early centuries of Christianity. It might be argued that the relevance of this proposition is elusive but ~~tho~~ ^{to} the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young Catholics, such as myself, that are leaving the church to join Protestantism such a claim to historical validity is of the utmost importance. The foundation of our faith rests upon the validity of their claim. *One can also argue that all "history bound" religions are mixed in myth and that a new religion is the only "valued"*

Yet in seeing the validity of ~~his~~ history we cannot permit ~~ourselves~~ ourselves to become what Ms. Cook calls "Antiquarians," revering the past for its existence and not for its merit. Such a tendency, seen especially in high school history courses, often leads teachers to push the names and dates without relaying to the pupils the relevance of these facts to their own existence. The ideal, therefore, is to recognize the lessons that history performs for us while at the same time not losing grip of our own present reality.

As far as what a history professor should do in a survey course is easily established, once one recognizes the value

and the relevance of history. One of the most important factors (one of which my own experience has shown to be lacking in most courses) is for the professor to build an adequate framework or structure of dates and places. The students need to conceptualize the on going process of time. To really appreciate the landscape of particular period of history it is helpful to have a well charted map. The purpose of such a map is, in part, to make history, or at least that portion of history, something that the student can grasp, something that the student can pick up and take home with him, something that he can master.

The second most essential aspect in passing on historical truth (sometimes I find the use of that word in the context of historical study to be somewhat self-righteous) is establishing the "world view" of the particular period. What I mean is that the professor must fill in the details of the map that dates and places leave unmentioned. It is especially important that the professor present all the sides to these issues. And because it is foolish to believe that a professor is going to present his or her course without expressing his or her biases, it should be made clear early in the semester (for all those poor unsuspecting freshmen in the class) that such tendencies exist.

Finally, realizing that the course being taught is a survey course the professor should be conscious of two things that are infamously present in these type of courses: The over

In survey courses in all disciplines of which I am aware ^{p. 1} the general trend has been to reduce the amount of reading, the content of lectures, the ~~low~~ level of grammar accepted in work, among other matters. abundance of material versus the lack of time and the fact that because such a course is often a core requirement most students are not present just for their health. How one combats these problems is no easy matter. <

All a professor can do, in reference to the lack of time, is to make sure that the time spent in lecturing is evenly distributed among the various subtopics. And in reference to the general apathy of the students, for the most part that is the students responsibility. But what a professor can do is to create an atmosphere of comradeship and therefore make the student feel that they are facing this burden (core requirements) together.

History and its relevance is a question for which in our present society there is no universally accepted answer. I personally feel that history is extremely relevant to my existence. But such a question is put in a box by our society that is marked "Relative Questions."

Teacher enthusiasm can be infectious.